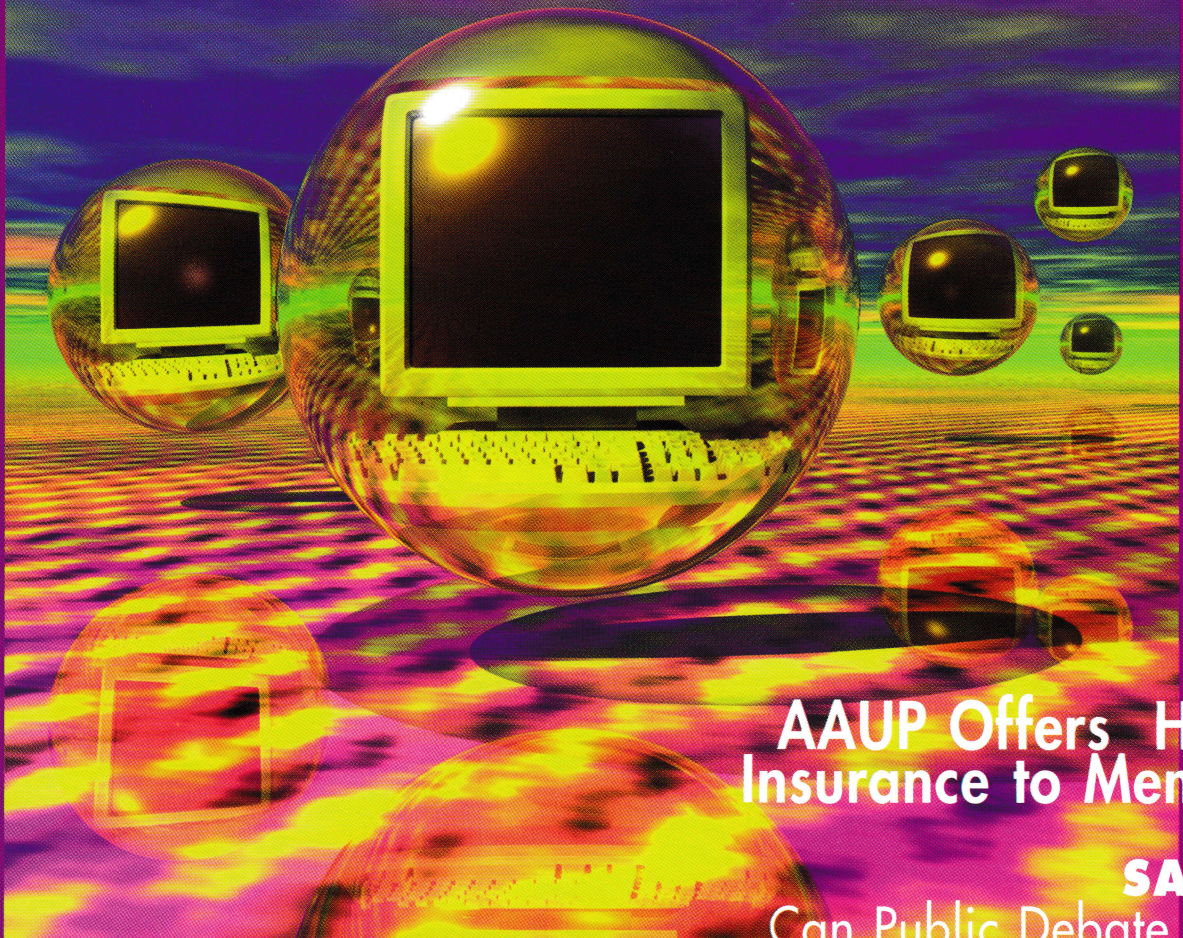


Adjunct Advocate

The news magazine for adjunct college faculty • Mar/Apr 2001 •

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Adjunct Advocate

the news magazine for adjunct college faculty

(ISSN 1078-5264)

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The Adjunct Advocate is published bimonthly. Direct editorial and advertising correspondence to P.O. Box 130117, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48113-0117. Telephone (734) 930-6854. Unsolicited manuscripts are welcome, but will not be returned without a SASE. Subscription inquiries and change of address should be directed to: The Adjunct Advocate, P.O. Box 130117, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48113-0117. Individual Subscriptions: USA 1 year \$25.00; 2 years \$45.00; Canada, add \$10.00 per year, everywhere else add \$20.00 per year. Single copy: \$5.00. POSTMASTER: Please send undeliverable copies to: The Adjunct Advocate 1341 Traver, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48105. Return postage guaranteed.

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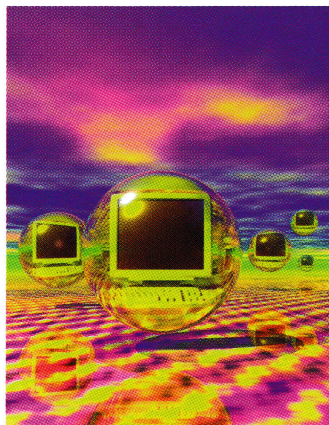
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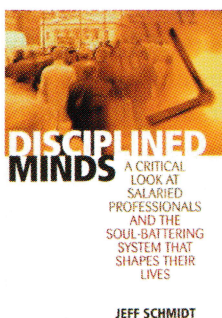
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One intriguing aspect of this book

is Schmidt's definition of the commonly used but rarely defined word, "professional." He cautions against confusing the term with "white collar worker," and claims that most white collar workers today are non-professionals.

ARE YOU DISCIPLINED?

DISCIPLINED MINDS is a radical, disturbing, and provocative look at professional life. It offers a profound analysis of the personal struggles for identity and meaning in the lives of today's 21 million professionals. The book will shake up readers, particularly faculty members, graduate students, and others who participate in academic life. This book represents critical theory in the best sense of the tradition: it is a well-written, compelling description of how graduate school, as well as professional training and practice, help reproduce social, political, and economic stratification. Luckily, this book also offers disheartened graduate students, soul-weary professors, and frustrated professionals a better understanding of the structural conditions that constrain their professional work, and ways to combat the conformity that is endemic to academic life.

Schmidt begins by discussing what he calls "widespread career burnout" among professionals, the chronic "workaholism," fatigue, isolation and depression common among many professionals today. "Professionals," he writes, "are not happy campers." Ironically, such depression is most likely to hit the most devoted professionals--those who have been the most deeply involved with their work. "You can't burn out if you've never been on fire" (pp. 1-2). The hidden root of this burnout and depression, Schmidt contends, is the professional's lack of political control over his or her creative work.

In addition, the dissonance between the early goals of many professionals (e.g., to make a difference, to pursue a social vision, to better oneself and society) and the relative powerlessness of professional practice creates disillusionment. According to Schmidt, graduate and professional schools are intellectual "boot camps" that systematically grind down students' spirit and ultimately produce obedient, rather than independent thinkers.

One intriguing aspect of this book is Schmidt's definition of the commonly used but rarely defined word, "professional." He cautions against confusing the term with "white collar worker," and claims that most white collar workers today are non-professionals. He categorizes lawyers, teachers, counselors, nurses, doctors, engineers, scientists, professors, actors, and executives as professionals. He excludes from his definition of professionals those who hire and fire professionals (e.g., upper level-executives) as well as para-professionals such as clerical workers, paralegals and teachers' aides.

Schmidt challenges the popular belief that professionals are independent practitioners, such as self-employed doctors or lawyers. He writes that the overwhelming majority of professionals (i.e., 8 out of 9) are salaried employees rather than independent practitioners. Thus, when writing about professionals, he has salaried employees in mind. Schmidt also critiques the widespread belief that today's professionals embody neutrality.

Schmidt also examines popular misconceptions about professional work. In the section, "Assignable Curiosity," he demonstrates that professionals--university profes-

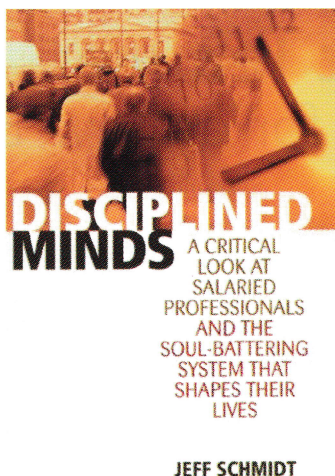
sors in particular--have much less control over their own research than is generally thought. He describes how the needs of major corporations and government agencies drive university research. In particular, he discusses the profound influence of government grants in determining what researchers choose to study. Another popular and powerful notion that Schmidt refutes is the belief that more highly educated people tend to be more creative, independent, and liberal.

Graduate School: Cult Indoctrination

One of the most compelling and provocative discussions in the book is the author's examination of the experience of graduate school. In this examination, Schmidt draws parallels between graduate school programs and cult indoctrination. Elaborating the thesis that professional schools serve more to indoctrinate than to teach technical skills, Schmidt details how graduate students are subjected to crushing reading loads, mindless grunt work in labs, and mind-numbing tasks of memorization.

Drawing on data from his interviews with graduate students, Schmidt identifies themes common to both the cult and the graduate school experience: Schmidt does point out that professional training is not *always* like cult indoctrination. For example, he describes his own graduate experience as a "great and rewarding time" (p. 219). While acknowledging the positive features of his graduate study, Schmidt notes that many other students in his program "emerged looking and acting like broken versions of their former selves" (p. 219).

The final chapter, "Now or Never," outlines how professionals in all fields can maintain a sense of integrity and purpose within the mainstream workplace. As Schmidt points out, making a difference and working for social change do not require one to be employed by a non-profit, reform-oriented organization. What they do require, however, is that



one take a stance as a "radical professional" (p.265). Such a professional continually critiques the social role of the institution and system for which he or she works. In addition, radical professionals understand and question their place as workers within a conservative system, and they refuse to buy into the mystique of the independent, self-directed professional.

Ultimately, the book succeeds in laying out a strong case for the radicalization of professionals. Whereas most critical studies of education focus on social reproduction in elementary and secondary schools, Schmidt's analysis examines how these mechanisms play out in graduate education and induction into the professional career. However, as with many analyses based on social reproduction theories, Schmidt's examination tends to over-generalize. He does include some examples of student experiences from other fields, but by basing his observations largely on just one field (i.e., his own field of physics), he seems to imply that all graduate education is equally conservative, demanding of personal compromise, and inhospitable to a diversity of views.

The book would also benefit from the inclusion of other voices. I wanted

to hear from graduate students in disciplines other than physics, and I was looking for narratives about resistance. In particular, I wanted to hear stories from students who had resisted the system completely and chosen different paths altogether.

These are minor points, however, compared to the central weakness of the book, namely Schmidt's failure to address questions of methodology. Although he uses powerful examples presumably collected from interviews with students, Schmidt never explains how he went about collecting this information. Despite the fact that the book was intended for a mainstream audience, the author still should have provided some discussion of the theoretical framework guiding his work and the methods used to accomplish it.

Another problem is Schmidt's inattention to the actual experiences of practicing professionals--both those who conform and those who resist. While providing examples of how students resist conformity in graduate school, he seems to ignore examples of how currently employed professionals offer resistance. This important oversight leaves the reader with the impression that all professionals are hapless cogs in the machinery of social reproduction.

Despite some significant weaknesses, *Disciplined Minds* still offers a powerful analysis of the impact of professional work on our minds and hearts. Moreover, Schmidt offers concrete suggestions helpful to fellow travelers who feel trapped by "the system." These suggestions enable us to reaffirm and act upon the original commitment we made to use our life's work to promote social good.--Andi O'Connor ✍